



The House of Whispers

By William Johnston

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

THE GASTON PEARLS.

Synopsis.—Circumstances having prevented Spaulding Nelson, clerk, from joining the American forces going to France, he is in a despondent mood when he receives an invitation to dinner from his great-uncle, Rufus Gaston. On the way to the house he meets, under peculiar circumstances, a young girl, apparently in trouble, to whom he has an opportunity to be of slight service. She lives in the same apartment building as Rufus Gaston, and he accompanies her to the house. Gaston and his wife are going to Maine for a trip and want to leave Nelson in charge of the apartment. He accepts. Gaston and his wife tell their great-nephew of mysterious noises—"whispers"—which they have heard in the house. On his way to the Gaston apartment next Sunday Nelson again meets his accidental acquaintance of a few days before, Barbara Bradford. She urges him not to allow the fact of their being acquainted to be known. The hero takes an instinctive dislike to the superintendent, Wick, of the building.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"Quite a proper precaution," I admitted.

"The elevator boy reported your arrival," he continued, "but he wasn't quite sure it was you. The fact that you were clattering with the young lady bothered him, and me, too. Mr. Gaston told me you were a stranger in the city, and I didn't expect to find you knowing one of the Bradfords."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "Well, you see I do know her," when I recalled her request that I would not recognize her until we had been introduced in some fashion. I contented myself with saying merely: "Well, I hope you are satisfied now."

"Of course, Mr. Nelson, of course," he answered, though his looks belied his words. Manifestly he was still puzzled over my acquaintance with Miss Bradford.

"I hope you will find it comfortable here," he said, plainly trying to continue the conversation. "If there's ever anything the matter, just call me on the house phone; Mr. Wick, the name is."

"I will," I said, and he unwillingly withdrew.

"If there's ever anything the matter . . . Was there something sinister in the superintendent's parting remark? Once more the warnings of my relatives flashed into my mind. What was wrong in the house? Why did he anticipate that I might be calling him up? Why did he exhibit such an interest in me and in my acquaintance with the girl across the hall? Somehow the man's whole aspect had impressed me unfavorably.

I carried my bag back to my bedroom and unpacked it. The various attachments in the bath looked so inviting that I stripped and amused myself for half an hour testing the variety of showers and sprays provided. Donning my bathrobe I leisurely smoked an excellent cigar from a box old Rufus had thoughtfully—or perhaps thoughtlessly—left open on his desk, and then returned to the inspection of my new quarters.

As it was Sunday, I had a whole day of leisure before me, and I felt that if I was to clear up the mystery that had driven the old couple out, it was incumbent on me to make a minute study of my surroundings. Only in the little rear sitting room was there any atmosphere of hominess. All the rest of the place was done in the best department store style, even to the richly bound sets of standard authors which lined the walls of the living room, most of which I found had their pages uncut.

My search of the place—and it was thorough, extending even to the empty canisters in the pantry and kitchen—revealed nothing whatever that gave any hint as to the cause or explanation of old Rufus' fears. The place seemed the least likely of all places in the world to hide any mystery, just a great, modern, luxurious apartment, equipped with every possible device for the comfort and convenience of its occupants. It would have to be an up-to-date ghost to find itself at home here.

But wait! Perhaps the safe held some clue to the problem they wanted me to solve. But where was the safe? I had not noticed it anywhere in my repeated journeys through the rooms. I made another tour looking for it. More than likely it had been located in some inconspicuous place purposely. But where? At last I located it, be-

hind a faded crayon portrait of Mrs. Gaston, in the little sitting room.

I lifted the picture to the floor and stood hesitant before the safe. Should I, or should I not, open it? The fact that they had given me the combination seemed to imply that I had a perfect right to inspect its contents.

"Six to the right, four to the left, two to the right, eight to the left."

As I turned the knob I repeated the combination to myself. There was a little click, and the steel door came open. Reaching in I drew forth two old-fashioned jewel cases of leather, both securely locked. I took from my pocket the keys my great-uncle had given me and toyed with them thoughtfully. Among them were two tiny keys that undoubtedly belonged to the jewel cases. Had I the right to use them? I decided that I had.

The first case I opened contained, so far as my limited knowledge of precious stones enabled me to judge, nothing but a bunch of cheap junk, bits of finery from another century, coral earrings that Mrs. Gaston may have worn when she was a little girl, combs of jet, amber beads, quaint hoop earrings and a ring or two, merely the trinkets of a vain old woman, treasured from the time when the money to buy them was scarce. There was nothing in the lot that any self-respecting thief would take, precious as they may have been to their owner. I locked up that case and returned it to the safe and opened the other.

As I raised the lid an involuntary exclamation of amazement and admiration escaped me. There, nestled in the center of a velvet-lined tray, lay gleaming the most wonderful mass of iridescent pearls I ever had laid eyes on, surely worth a vast fortune. Turning them over and over admiringly in the light, at last I laid them back in the tray and began to investigate the other treasures the casket contained. In other trays in the box I found diamonds galore, a great solitaire that must have been all of seven carats, dinner rings, bar pins, crescents, stars, earrings, and in a compartment all by itself, a tiara of rubies and diamonds. There was also a variety of other gems, pins and rings wrought in curious designs with rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and pearls, some uncut diamonds and loose fragments of pieces that had evidently been torn apart to add to other settings, the collection of a woman with unlimited money to spend.

With trembling hands I restored the jewels to their hiding place, twice testing the knob to make sure that the combination had set. The unexpected sight of such a vast fortune in gems had filled me with strange emotions, with thoughts so evil I hardly dared admit them to myself. There must have been nearly half a million dollars' worth of precious stones in that one casket. The Gaston pearls in themselves were a fortune.

If only they were mine!

To every honest man at times come temptations as great as come to any criminal. No man knows whether or not he is honest until he has been put to the test. I knew! I was tempted, strongly tempted, to take my great aunt's jewels. What was to hinder? The old couple were to be absent for months. They had left me in charge and had given me their keys and the safe combination. There would be abundant time for disposing of the jewels before their theft was discovered. With the money they would bring I could satisfy my craving for adventure. I could travel the world over.

Yet, as I look back at it, all the time I was thinking these thoughts, I knew I would not take the jewels. A normal man cannot steal. Even when his desires lead him to theft, his mind points out the folly and his conscience the wrong.

Resolutely I put the thought of the jewels out of my head—or tried to—and stretching myself out on a couch gave myself up to pleasant reveries about my delightful new acquaintance, the girl who lived just across the hall. I pictured myself finding some way of winning her confidence and of helping her out of her mysterious trouble. And what if eventually old Rufus should make me his heir? Surely I would need a mate with whom to share the joys of having a fortune. With visions of Barbara Bradford bedecked with my great-aunt's choicest jewels, I fell asleep.

It was almost dusk when I was awakened by the arrival of the ex-

pression with my trunk. After I had received for them and had unpacked, I suddenly realized that I was hungry, for I had eaten nothing since breakfast. Hastily I donned my clothes, stopping only to count my money. With a week's salary in my pocket and no room rent to pay for several months, surely I could afford a good dinner to celebrate the change in my fortunes.

As I went out I stopped in the lower hall to chat with the telephone girl, ostensibly to ask her to take any messages for me, though I was expecting none.

"You're Mr. Nelson, ain't you?" she asked, eyeing me with curious interest. "Yes," I replied, "Mr. Spaulding Nelson. I am occupying the Gaston apartment while they are away."

A flicker of amusement crossed her face, with just the suggestion of a sneer.

"I hope you'll enjoy living here," "Why not?" I replied carelessly. "If any one calls, say that I will be home by ten, Miss—"

"Nellie Kelly," she added.

As I chatted with her the elevator had descended again, and three persons emerged, one of them being she for a sight of whom I had been intentionally loitering. One of the two persons with her was plainly the mother and the other I took to be an older sister. She resembled Barbara strongly, but there was a world-weary look in her face, and her beauty seemed to me to be marred by a weak, sensitive, passionate mouth. But I had no eyes for her, so absorbed was I in the appearance of the girl I had met in the park. If I had thought her beautiful then, she was ravishing now. Her raven hair was piled high and caught back with a great Spanish comb. An ermine-trimmed evening coat of brocade swathed her figure, opening at the front just enough to give me a glimpse of her bared white neck. Involuntarily my hand went to my hat, but into her eyes came a haughty look and one hand went to her lips for just a second, as if she were warning me again not to recognize her. I stood there abashed as she swept by me to the waiting motor. The telephone girl's voice jarred me back to my senses.

"I thought you was a friend of the Bradfords," she said sarcastically.

"Sure he is," said the voice of Mr. Wick behind me. "Didn't you hear the boys telling me he came in twice with Miss Bradford?"

"Well, what of it?" I answered lamely and fled from the house, indignant at this open prying of the employees into my affairs, yet entirely at a loss to know how to stop it. How could I tell them I knew Barbara Bradford, when she had just cut me dead?

Feeling vaguely dissatisfied with my first day in my new home, I boarded a bus and rode downtown to a little French cafe, where my comrades and I had been accustomed to go when we were in funds. All about me were merry Sunday evening dinner parties, and I was alone. Birge and Roller had gone, and Miss Bradford had refused to recognize me. I hurried through my dinner, paid my check, and was leaving the restaurant when at a corner table I spied the scar-faced man whom I had seen in the park a few evenings before.

He looked up and caught my glance. Into his face came a strange expression, a look of malignant hate, not mingled with fear. Boldly I returned his gaze. I was tempted to walk right up to him and ask him what he had been doing in the park, and why he had warned his mate away when he saw me there. Yet I had no right to interfere. Miss Bradford had not taken me into her confidence. I had only suspicions to go on that the two men had been there to attempt some wrong on the girl.

Slowly I left the restaurant, puzzled more than ever by the malevolent glance he had given me, and perplexed as to how I was going to serve Miss Bradford, when she would not even recognize me.

CHAPTER III.

My great-aunt's pearls were gone—stolen—vanished from the wall safe!

Still discrediting the evidence of my own eyes, I lighted a match and peered into the steel-lined recess. It was empty. On the table beside me was one of the two jewel boxes it had contained, the one filled with worthless trinkets. The other, which had contained the priceless Gaston pearls and the other rich treasure, had vanished.

Today was Saturday. Six days before I had arrived in the apartment. There had been two jewel cases then. With my own hands I had put them both back safe in their hiding place. I recalled having tested the knob to make sure that the combination had set. Yet since that time someone had opened the safe. Someone had removed the jewels. Who could it have been?

To the best of my knowledge there had been but two persons in the rooms, old Mrs. Burke, my aunt's trusted laundress, and myself. Cer-

tainly I had not taken the jewels, and it seemed absurd to suspect Mrs. Burke, who had been in Mrs. Gaston's employ for years and had long been entrusted with a key to the servants' entrance. Yet who else was there to suspect?

Recovering a little from my bewilderment I hastened to the telephone. I must notify the superintendent and also the police that the apartment had been robbed. I decided, too, that I should wire my great-uncle Rufus of the robbery, and then it dawned on me for the first time that I did not know the old couple's address. They merely had said that they were going to Maine. Never mind, there was nothing that they could do in their absence. Probably I could get their address from the superintendent, or from Mr. Gaston's bankers. The first thing to do was to notify the superintendent.

But wait! With my hand on the telephone, I stopped short. It dawned on me that in all likelihood I would be the one most under suspicion.

If detectives were called in, I could see that their first move would be to lay the theft to my door. They would investigate everything about me, and I remembered with distress that I, Spaulding Nelson, just now was out of a job—and far worse, stood discredited at the only place of employment I had had in New York.

My discharge had come that very morning like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. The reason for my peremptory dismissal I had not been able to fathom. In some mysterious fashion my employer's wrath had been roused toward me. Why, I could not imagine. Certainly my life, especially since my two comrades had gone away, had been circumspect enough.

Even though I was living in a seven-thousand-dollar apartment I was unemployed, all but penniless, just recently dismissed for some unexplained reason, and now more than likely to be accused or at least suspected of theft.

Yet only this very morning I had been taking an optimistic view of life. Delighted at having cut my living expenses in two, I had decided to take twenty dollars of the thirty-five I drew that day and add it to the one hundred and eighty dollars I had in the savings bank. I would mail a registered letter to my mother, and reduce my indebtedness to her. On my way to business I stopped at the bank, and drew out every penny I had there. It was my intention to go to the post office at lunch time to register the letter. Just before twelve, Mr. Wood, the head of the firm, had sent for me.

"Mr. Nelson," he had said wrathfully, the minute I entered his office, "here is your week's salary. You will leave our employ at once."

Stunned by his manner and his words, I gasped out something about not understanding what he meant. I knew of no reason that would warrant my discharge.

"I can't put it in any plainer English, can I?" he roared at me. "Get out!"

I held my ground.

"Surely I am entitled to some explanation," I protested. "If there's been anything wrong with my work—"

"Your work's all right," he belittled. "It's this," he cried, waving at me a letter that had been lying on his desk. "This letter is enough. It exposes you for what you are."

Dumfounded at his amazing statement, I demanded to see the accusing document. Angriely he refused.

"You know as well as I what's in it."

In vain I protested. Every word I uttered only seemed to add to his wrath. In the end he almost hustled me out of his office. Blindly I found my way to the street, still clutching in my hand the week's pay he had rudely thrust on me.

That letter to which he referred—who could have written it? What could have been in it that had so inflamed my employer against me? I racked my brains in vain, puzzling to account for it. I had not been aware that I had an enemy in the world, yet who but an enemy could have written a letter that would have such dire effect?

The mystery of my dismissal was too great for me to solve. The one thing I felt thankful for was that it had come before I had sent off my money. At least I had two hundred and fifteen dollars in my pocket. Under my present mode of life that would last me quite a while, surely until I found another position. Well, there was nothing to do but make the best of it.

Barbara's sister with a "past."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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